

My space Jeff Martin



AN ECLECTIC array of works line the walls in Richmond's Appleton Street Studios. Traditional still lifes bump up against contemporary abstracts as artist and co-founder Jeff Martin makes his way past the 16 studios inside this warren-like building. Occasionally, he stops inside another artist's studio, showing off their work with something resembling paternal pride. Martin established the studios in 2005 with friend and fellow artist Sandra Bardas. Bardas died in December 2007, but her spirits is everywhere here. From next year, the Sandra Bardas Studio Grant will allow a young artist aged 30 or under to spend 12 months working inside her former studio.

What was the original vision for the studios?

Sandra and I were lamenting the fact that we couldn't find a place that was secure, where we felt really comfortable and safe to work. It wasn't a share space, it wasn't a communal space or a co-op, it was a very serious workspace for artists who were here to work. We said, well we can't find it, let's make it. I think we were a bit naive, because we assumed that if we made something that we wanted, other people would want to come to join us. It wasn't very long before we were at 100 per cent occupancy. We still have people

knocking on the door... You find that for a lot of people here, this is their sanctuary. Some people have really hectic jobs, some have been through a serious trauma. Each studio means something special to somebody. Sandra had cancer, and this was her place of refuge. I couldn't imagine renting out her space to anyone else.

Did you discuss the idea of the annual grant before she died?

No, we didn't have that discussion, but we had a discussion about her vision at the start, when we were setting up the studio. We talked about if the studios were ever in a position to do something with younger artists, which was her passion, we'd do that. When Sandra died, the most logical thing to do with her space was to provide it to under-30-year-old artists. David (her husband) suggested putting some money in, and that's how the grant came about.

Tell me about Sandra Bardas.

Sandra was very, very special. We met in Paris in 1999, I was passing through and I met Sandra and her husband and we hit it off. We became really close friends. Sandra was 66 when she died, with six children, 10 grandchildren. She was very gracious, kind, insightful. She had the ability to change people's lives for the better without realising she was doing it. She would put people in contact with other people—not meddling, she would

just make things work. She was very private about what she did. It wasn't about ego. She enabled me to become the painter I am. She believed in me and was my greatest supporter. She would pose the right question to make you think differently.

Do you have a sense of her spirit lingering here?

Absolutely... she's still here. You could ask anybody.

What appealed about this building?

I hated this building. The day after we had the conversation (about establishing the studios), she rang me and said "I've found it." I was like, "what do you mean you've found it, we only decided yesterday to do it". She said, "no, I've found the building, it's just right". We came in here and I thought it was horrible. There was no power, it was dark and dingy. They were doing something with cars downstairs which was really dodgy. Upstairs they were making porn and growing dope in one of the rooms. It has become something special rather than something sinister.

What does your own studio here represent to you?

It's my sanctuary, my thinking space. I don't invite many people in here. A blank canvas comes in here and goes out looking like something else that you're prepared to show people. When you have an exhibition and people come to look at

what's hanging on the wall, they only see the end result. They don't see the process. For any artist, it's the process that's the joy. That's why we do it.

How would you describe the energy in the building?

Electric. We have an open day every year. Last year, every artist put up a list of what they had done in the 12 months since the last open day. It was just incredible. It was a constant source of amazement for Sandra and me on these open days to look at each other and say, how did this happen? Part of it has been organic, and just going in with the right attitude to work. People are incredible, we all support each other.

What do you hope the successful applicant will take away from their time here?

I'm excited by the idea of somebody coming in and doing what I've done with the opportunities. If they tell us what they hope for, I will do everything in my power to make sure they are heading in the right direction.

Applications for the Sandra Bardas Studio Grant, which includes 12 months' studio access and \$5000 worth of art materials, can be downloaded at appletonstreetstudios.com. Applications close on September 1 and the winner will be announced on her birthday, October 5.
INTERVIEW: LINDY PERCIVAL
PICTURE: ROB BANKS

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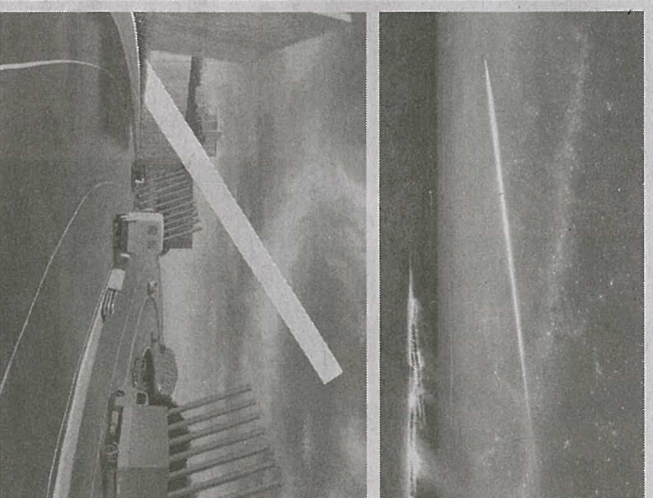
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